A B-Girl Continuum

Research Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation *with distinction* in Dance in the undergraduate colleges of The Ohio State University

Generously funded by The Ohio State University Arts Undergraduate Research Scholarship

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April 15, 2021

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Introduction

Standing in a circle, I bounce to the rhythm of the music. There's a pulsing, funky jive rumbling within me. My feet are stepping to the beat as my elbows swing alongside their lead. I feel loose in my body. I'm at ease. I'm vibing. Heat builds up in my core until this sense of power within signals to me that I need to use it. I'm in the center of the circle. Focused in, I rock to the rhythms, twisting back and forth. My hips shift to counter the weight of my steps. I'm excited and nervous at the same time, but I won't let my moment go to waste. The music sweeps me to the floor with one blare of a horn and my feet take off into their braiding footwork steps. My legs feel heavy yet move so quickly. They are my power put into motion. Praises for innovation, strength, and smooth style are thrown at me from those outside the circle. Landing in a freeze, I punctuate what I need to say like one would place an exclamation mark at the end of their sentence. I take my place again outside the circle. I'm winded. Someone has already claimed the center before I've even caught my breath. As they move, my mind replays the way my body responded to the music. I know I made mistakes, but I still had fun. My smile grows bigger with every exhale as I watch whoever claimed the center, eagerly waiting for the next opportunity to jump back in.

This is what it feels like when I'm at practice. Since October 2020, I have been training as a b-girl with the breaking scene in Columbus, Ohio. B-boying, often referred to as breaking or breakdancing, originated in the Bronx, New York during the 1970s as part of the larger cultural movement known as hip-hop. At that time, a majority of the African American, Afro-Caribbean, and Latinx neighborhoods created, practiced, and uplifted the growing culture of hip-hop. The term b-boy or b-girl was coined by one of hip-hop's founders, DJ Kool Herc, describing this

specific style of dancer. The “B” stands for “break-boy,” but many pioneers in the culture argue it stands for “Bronx-boy,” “battle-boy,” or even “beat-boy” (Schloss 59). Personally, I associate the term b-boy and b-girl with more than just someone who practices the dance, but also as someone who embraces and contributes back to the culture of hip-hop. This additional weight to the definition comes from my own experiences growing in breaking. Watching the b-boys I practice with and their commitment to the dance, competing in battles, showing up to cultural events, and hanging out with one another outside of practice showed me that b-boying is more than just dancing but about how you engage in the culture as well. B-boying is a lifestyle.

The title of my research, “A B-Girl Continuum,” depicts the journey of me progressing as a b-girl alongside my increasing understanding for what it means to practice a dance within its cultural context. Most of my experiences learning dance have been within classroom or studio contexts usually implying there is one teacher, structured rehearsal times, and an orientation towards the front of the room. Specifically, within university classes teaching dances of the African diaspora, I wondered if learning the dance in its cultural context would help me gain a deeper understanding of its cultural values and how these values potentially inform the dance or movement. My university hip-hop teacher introduced me to a local b-boy, Kaleb Murphy, aka B-boy Vanilla Nice. He brought me into the breaking scene in Columbus and has been someone I look up to in the dance because of his skill, knowledge and contribution to the culture.

I realize none of my work is new to the dance field. Everything I am studying is work that people have been doing for a long time. Yet the nature of a continuum progresses as an ongoing series in which each segment is similar to the next, but the ends evolve to be vastly different from one another. Despite my newness to the work, “A B-Girl Continuum” alludes to the daily progress of partaking in the conversations surrounding hip-hop culture through my own

personal lens as a developing b-girl with a contemporary-based movement background. Learning to be a part of the local hip-hop community means more than just learning a new style of dance, but also means building new relationships with the b-boys here, supporting one another in our progress, and participating at local, cultural hip-hop events. It means I'm also engaging in the lifestyle of a b-girl.

Methodology

My research takes a culturally sensitive, ethnographic approach. This approach is based on the idea that movement is embodied knowledge, thus implying that to responsibly study dance, one should also study its culture. The two should be considered as interdependent factors of one another. I shape part of my theoretical framework inspired by the work of dance ethnographer Deidre Sklar, in her essay "Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance." Sklar writes, "The way people move is more than biology, more than art and more than entertainment. All movement must be considered as an embodiment of cultural knowledge" (30). In other words, studying a dance asks one to also study the culture in which it lives.

In addition, my theoretical framework also requires deep consideration of my own positionality. The ways I go about entering hip-hop culture through the b-boying community, especially with intentions pertaining to academia and research, must consider the discourse about appropriation. I look to what dance scholar Imani Kai Johnson writes in her essay "Black Culture Without Black People" about how the practice of breaking expands what many consider to be appropriation. She explains, "There is a difference between staking a claim to a culture (i.e, appropriation) and the culture's staking a claim to you, possessing you, moving you in unfamiliar and possibly uncomfortable ways that become essential to a person's existence" (192). Entering the b-boying scene as a white woman with a contemporary concert dance background, I desire

for my own understandings of dance to be challenged. I engage with the b-boying community by stepping back in what I know and adapt myself to the ways b-boying takes place within its cultural context.

Furthermore, breaking carries fundamental aspects in its dance practice that derive from Africanist aesthetics such as call and response, polyrhythms, improvisation, and the element of the circle or cypher (Johnson, "Black Culture" 193). Many b-boys and b-girls do not identity as a part of the African diaspora, yet have learned, embodied, and personalized these Africanist aesthetics when practicing the dance. In fact, Johnson describes this phenomenon within breaking. She explains, "In learning how to cypher, one embodies Africanist aesthetics so much so that they may also acquire legible understanding of aspects of other African diasporic ritual practices as well…They recognize that with these identities [in hip-hop] come some degree of playing with African diasporic cultural elements, and thus blackness" ("Black Culture" 193). As a white, female researcher engaged in hip-hop culture through breaking, I take on the responsibility to respect the linage and history of hip-hop as I learn breaking. This responsibility requires me to deepen my understandings of the movement's cultural meanings as I embody them.

I applied this theoretical framework to my research by conducting interviews with local dance leaders currently or previously engaged with hip hop culture. I requested them to share in their experiences about how dance and its values have influenced their lives, in whatever way that means to them. Johnson speaks about the ability movement has to express meaning beyond what one could say with words. She explains, "Within and across dance forms, movement communicates and transmits knowledge that allows people of different nationalities, ethnicities, and races to speak to one another less encumbered by the limits of verbal language" ("Black

Culture"192). However, Sklar points out that to understand a dance form within its cultural context requires articulation beyond just the corporeal experience. She promotes, "The concepts embodied in movement are not necessarily evident in the movement itself. To understand movement as cultural behavior, one has to move into words" (31). The significance of these interviews is that I can learn about my research subjects' extensive wealth of embodied knowledge through the ways they tell their stories; I can understand the contexts they describe through their narration without having had the exact experiences they did. The information my interviewees offered gives me access into what they learned through dance to help me better understand what values their dance culture upholds and how these values show up in the movement.

I also engaged in my research as a participant-observer. This means I studied the dance community by doing the dance. I learned about the b-boy community by b-boying. Dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz explains in his article "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip-Hop Dance and Body Power" that dances involving Africanist aesthetics and Africanist musical features are subjected to misrepresentation by those who only observe the dance rather than physically engaging. He writes, "If conversation occurs between music and its dancers, and between dancers, the subtleties of that conversation are missed in the separation of participant and observer…movements are viewed without concern for their performative implications, [thus] meaning is emptied out" (68). Considering this, especially related to hip-hop, it is not enough to merely analyze the dance through observation or else one ultimately will overlook the knowledge that is transmitted nonverbally through movement (Johnson, "Black Culture" 192).

Furthermore, dance historian Nadine George-Graves describes the impacts of becoming physically engaged in her research about the professional dance company Urban Bush Women in

her book *Urban Bush Women: Twenty years of African American Dance Theatre, Community Engagement, and Working It Out*. She writes, "I served as a participant observer, and my embodied research was invaluable. The knowledge I gained about the ways the dancers move and their training to achieve the aesthetic directly influenced my analysis" (xi). My emphasis to engage in my research by practicing b-boying addresses my efforts to avoid imposing external value systems into my analysis. I hope that my analysis increases by encountering the cultural meanings of b-boying through a process of consistent embodied practice.

In addition, engaging in my research as a participant-observer pays respect to the knowledge of hip-hop practitioners, leading me to understand the culture's values through their own experiences and insight. In his book *Foundations: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York*, dance ethnographer Joseph G. Schloss explains the dangers of approaching academic hip-hop scholarship without first-hand community engagement. He writes, "But in the case of b-boying, which is intended to be experienced in person, such an approach can distort its subject to the point of invisibility. Unmediated hip-hop, by definition, cannot be understood without becoming personally involved in it" (8). By recognizing the impacts of studying a dance without crediting or giving context to its origin, I took the responsibility as a researcher to ensure my participation within the breaking community.

I spoke with James Alexander, also known as B-boy Osuga and founder of Flavor'd Flow studio in Columbus, who gave his perspective as someone who lives out the culture of hip-hop, to those entering the culture:

> There's such a separation from culture to the music to the dancing, you know. And it's crazy to see and think of b-boys and b-girls being like, "I'm gonna b-boy. I'm a b-girl" and they don't go to the cultural events. They don't cypher in open circles and they don't even listen to funk music or soul and blues or R&B. (James Alexander, interview)

Alexander calls out those who claim the identity as a b-boy or b-girl without truly engaging in the culture. He views engaging in the dance or with the music without participating in the cultural events, while still claiming to be a part of the culture as “crazy” or disrespectful. He defines hip-hop by its cultural meaning. Schloss explains that the term hip-hop refers to more than one concept. He writes, "The three kinds of hip-hop—hip-hop culture, rap music, and hip-hop attitude/generation—are closely related to each other, but they are not the same thing” (7). With this I must note, most of my discussion, perspective, and engagement with hip-hop comes from its cultural understanding. My interest in b-boying seeks learning more about its culture and community, and how the dance embodies its cultural meanings and values. Therefore, as part of my culturally sensitive approach, I am cognizant not to reproduce the definitions that reference hip-hop separate from its cultural application.

As Alexander points out, hip-hop culture is more than just the dance, music or events alone, but an experience of these together. In fact, from my own experiences learning hip-hop culture through its dances, many of my teachers such as BeRicky Ouk, Kaleb Murphy, and Donald Isom have orally passed on the common knowledge that the four elements of hip-hop culture are deejaying (DJ), emceeing/rapping (MC), b-boying, and graffiti (also referred to as writing). While each element of hip-hop may form sub-communities specializing in its practice, such as breaking or graffiti writing, the need for all the foundational elements together obligates an interdependence between them that uplifts the culture as a whole. In other words, one element of hip-hop cannot sustain the essence of the culture alone.

Critical Analysis of the Work

During weekly sessions with the group of b-boys I consistently practiced with, I learned about what it means to step back in what I carry through my contemporary-concert dance lens

and allow the ways of the community to take place. I say this not because I entered the space trying to function in a way with which I am familiar, but that I remained hyper-aware of my own perspectives. I allowed them to be challenged by partaking in the community and practicing as a b-girl in the way others typically would. An example of this is when I learned about "b-boy time."

When Murphy would say practice is at 6pm, I typically showed up at 5:55pm, whereas everyone else showed up at 6:15pm, 6:20pm, or sometimes even 6:30pm. In concert dance, good etiquette means to arrive early to rehearsal, practice, or class. On the other hand, within b-boy culture, emphasis of time does not adhere to a schedule. Time is of the moment, focusing on who is present and responding to the energy between those in the room. Teena Marie Custer, a street-dance theater artist, reveals how the concept of time between the concert world and breaking world conflicts. She explains:

> If there's a jam, it's okay to come two hours after it starts 'cause it'll actually be starting then. When you bring that into a situation that is a concert dance gig, I've seen that a lot of directors have difficulty hiring b-boys because they say they're not professional. Even though those b-boys are abiding by that cultural sense of time that the b-boy community has, it doesn't match up with this other world. (Teena Marie Custer, interview)

Despite the tension between both dance worlds and their concepts of time, many b-boys I practice with explained that in corporate contexts, they shift from "b-boy time" to showing up when asked, especially when being paid. In fact, b-boys train for promptness and stay ready for whenever the moment requires performance. Custer speaks more about this readiness of b-boys and b-girls compared to contemporary dancers:

> They know when they're on, they're on and they will show out and show improve. Whereas I might be like, "Ohhh I don't know. I need to stretch for an hour." We're both serious when we

> get on the stage, but they know that they're gonna hit that shit…because it's time. (Teena Marie Custer, interview)

Through my observation of when others typically arrived at practice, I challenged my own expectations and adjusted to the b-boy community's sense of time especially considering Custer's explanation of "b-boy time." It is important to note that my understanding of cultural practices and values of breaking deepen when I am able to relate my experiences to the knowledge shared by my interviewees. Hearing their expertise about a subject creates a sense of affirmation in my progressive understanding about values of hip-hop culture through its dance. In fact, Alexander explains more about how personal experiences become validated knowledge in hip-hop culture:

> A lot of [history] is, I feel, learning through experiences. It's going to empower you more than learning from a book. You'll learn something… and then all of a sudden, you'll talk to Alien Ness and he'll say what you just read! That experience and that knowledge just gets strengthened and it's really cool when that happens. And you just kind of embody it without realizing. It's like subconscious, you know? (James Alexander, interview)

Alexander describes that when a personal experience is affirmed by the testament from an elder within the culture, the knowledge becomes more validated. An elder in hip-hop, often referred to as an OG meaning "original generation" or "original gang," describes someone who was present at the scene when hip-hop was first developing and also carries extensive years of experience and dedication to the culture. Being birthed in the 70s, some of hip-hop's OGs are still alive today, distinguishing them as most respectable and more knowledgeable. This is not to say that personal experiences without affirmation by an elder are invalid, but that their word adds a depth of credibility to one's embodied knowledge. I experienced this when I felt myself progressing my understanding about a certain move, to then having that understanding affirmed

by the experienced b-boys at practice. This honoring of the knowledge from those more experienced and more specifically, from elders, exemplifies the attribute of respect upheld in breaking. Part of learning to step back in my own understandings and doing culturally sensitive research means I show appropriate respect for the knowledge and contributions to the culture of those I interviewed and practiced with.

Furthermore, through stepping back in my own understandings, new ways of moving challenged my physical comfort zone. When I first started training, I felt self-conscious about how I danced in relation to the music. Within breaking, maintaining a close relationship with the music is crucial. In fact, breaking derived its name from the way b-boys or b-girls dance on the break in the music. Schloss explains this phenomenon with the metaphor, "Hip-hop music and b-boying were born as twins, and their mother was the break" (19). The musical break is the sonic absence of instruments that compels b-boys or b-girls to respond to the music. This compulsive, visceral response to the break within a b-boy or b-girl essentially sparks from a desire to, in Schloss's words, "restore the music" through movement (Schloss 19). DeFrantz adds to the ways music drives the dance in hip-hop. He writes, "the power in the dance is attained by aligning ourselves with the submerged rhythmic and linguistic potentials of the beat" (73). Specifically in hip-hop, the way one responds to music expresses more than just skill, but communicates one's inner voice through their choices, personal style, and attitude when moving.

At first, I was not comfortable with this highly musical way of dancing. Because of my contemporary dance background, I understood music as something to freely interpret. Embodying this new way of relating to music required hard, persistent work through open mindedness and consistency.

In fact, the spirit of a b-boy or b-girl carries this "show up and show improve" attitude, exuding this "go get 'em" energy or type of competitive confidence within their movement (Teena Marie Custer, interview) (James Alexander, interview). The value of self-confidence not only personally influences a b-boy or b-girl but affects the culture in its upholding of reputation. Having a reputation or a legacy for people to remember you requires a level of confidence to represent yourself and your skills throughout the competitive nature of b-boying. Confidence to this degree was not something I knew how to embody; it took time for me to learn. A journal entry from when I began breaking on October 10th, 2020 notes:

> I have a shyness that takes away from my movement. This I want to shed as I get more comfortable with top rock.

Thankfully, my developing relationship with the music helped advance my personal confidence and how I felt about myself in the dance to then embodying that confidence within my movement. By Jan 21st, 2021 my journal described this embracing of confidence:

> The energy was high, playful, and enticing to get out on the floor. I heard new rhythms and hit new beats like I never had before. I felt like I was becoming the music rather than dancing to it. Another b-boy at practice calls this feeling as "the zone," meaning to break without thinking too much. It was so inspiring tonight dancing in that feeling of "the zone."

Considering this amount of progress, I see how I connect with hip-hop culture in a more meaningful way by contextualizing the significance of confidence and relationship to the music within the practice of b-boying. More confidence expresses a stronger reputation while a closer relationship with the music demonstrates stronger movement quality. In fact, a few of the b-boys from practice commended me for my improving musicality. They testified that even if I don't know a lot of b-boying moves, I still danced to the music. Imani Kai Johnson explains in her article, "B-boying and Battling in a Global Context: The Discursive Life of Difference in Hip

Hop Dance," this close kind of connection to the dance as soulfulness, even if ability is lesser than. She writes, "Being soulful includes a perpetual state of learning about moves, music, the body, politics, and histories to enrich one's soul in the culture and ultimately the soul of the culture" (191). These b-boys were speaking to my desire behind my wanting to learn this dance, witnessing my commitment to improving each practice, and thus accepting me into the culture/community of b-boying (Johnson, "B-boying and Battling" 192).

Understanding how b-boying movements and music depend on one another exemplifies a way the culture operates, as a simultaneous experience of its elements together. In fact, the impacts of only ever knowing one element without the others puts the culture at risk of deviating into four completely different and unrelated art forms. Alexander explains the impacts regarding the participation in the dance separate from the culture and the ways media, i.e. news corporations, Instagram, and even marketing companies, contribute to this separation:

> Because of media…they can pick and choose what they feel like fighting for, or what values they can take. They can turn a blind eye to the social injustices… because they don't have to take up these values. Hip hop, you don't pick and choose your battles. We uplift the oppressed, no matter what. (James Alexander, interview)

Alexander makes an important statement noting how the influence of media encourages the extraction of hip-hop's elements from the core values of the culture. In fact, DeFrantz writes about how media affects hip-hop in reference to the issue of engaging with its dance and music only as an observer. He explains, "Subsequent reproduction of the dance by people looking only from the outside leads to the flat, militaristic repetition commonly viewed in the commercial music video sphere" (68-69). Hip-hop's foundational concepts of peace, love, unity, and uplifting the oppressed lose their purpose when the dance, music, and rap split into their own genres and are subjected to commodification. Commodification is the process in which elements

of a culture are plucked from their original context and exploited to appeal and sell to the larger society. The separate and commodified elements no longer require that they give back to their roots in hip-hop, but rather persist their own trajectory in gaining attention and popularity through media's spotlight. Kaleb elaborates on this conversation:

> In my opinion, if community uplifting stops becoming a thing and jams stop becoming a thing… the whole hip-hop world would just stop being a thing. I think that there would still be hip-hop music because it's branched off and become its own genre. But in the breaking world, if we stopped following those values, I think it's going downhill. No more jams. No more kids…that would be the end of the culture. (Kaleb Murphy, interview)

The need to engage with the culture when b-boying constitutes the essence of hip-hop culture. It is important to note that being a part of hip-hop culture requires a level of consistency in showing up to cultural events. Dorian S. Ham, a DJ and dance educator, explains his experience:

> If you just show up enough to a place, like show up to the jam, show up to the club, show up to a DJ night…And you know, it's just like, "Oh, you're one of the people who goes to that sort of thing. You're part of this community because we see you all the time. You're here." You just sort of show up and you're in. (Dorian S. Ham, interview)

Ham explains that showing up to cultural hip-hop events is part of contributing back to hip-hop culture because it keeps the essence alive and relevant. As Murphy said, if no more jams took place or if people did not show up to these jams, then the culture would eventually die. As mentioned earlier, hip-hop culture is meant to be a simultaneous experience of hip-hop's elements (breaking, MC, DJ, and graffiti) together. Despite the limitations of COVID-19, I was able to safely attend a graffiti gallery in support of one of my b-boy friends who is also a graffiti artist. It is common for people in hip-hop to learn or know more than one of its elements, such as

b-boying and graffiti or, like Murphy, b-boying and deejaying. At the event, live music was playing, an MC was introducing and what's upcoming, and graffiti artists were writing on the open practice walls. Despite not many people being around, the event felt alive as the elements of hip-hop together created an active environment.

Specifically, in my experiences b-boying, Murphy would often DJ at practice while the rest of us danced. We practiced as a sub-community extending from the larger hip-hop culture, advancing our technical skills in the dance while also upholding its values. Donald Isom, a professional dancer and hip-hop professor at The Ohio State University, explains how his neighborhood growing up demonstrated hip-hop culture through the way its elements existed harmoniously with one another:

> The Black community didn't know that every different block was representing a different element of hip hop. In Cleveland when we was growing up…every block that I went to, I saw a different element of hip hop. I can name the street exactly where I saw graffiti. I can tell you where I first saw breaking at. I can tell you where I first saw MCs and rappers. I can tell you when I saw my first party aka jam. I can tell you, but they didn't know because that's what we were just organically…naturally doing. (Donald Isom, interview)

He expresses how the different communities practicing the various elements of hip-hop from block to block represented a diversification of hip-hop culture. Even though each block engaged separately in an element of hip-hop from another, his neighborhood lived, breathed, and persisted the culture of hip-hop. Between Alexander, Murphy, and Isom, their thoughts regarding how elements of hip-hop culture being practiced in separate "sub-communities" concerns whether or not the sub-community contributes back to hip-hop culture by upholding it values.

Understanding the importance of the four elements of hip-hop culture, its additional fifth element, knowledge, upholds the value of knowing its history. The passing and sharing of

knowledge connects the culture between generations, paying respect for those who came before and have paved the way for hip-hop to become what it is today. Even more so, Isom explains how knowing history affects the way he moves:

> Knowledge to me is history. When I started really respecting the knowledge and education, you could start seeing the movement in my dancing. You can see that I was studying history. You could see it in my moves like, "Ay he took it back right there! He took it Old School." (Donald Isom, interview)

Similarly to Isom, as I understood the history of how a movement or dance came to be, my movement reflected that knowledge with a sense of confidence. Throughout practicing as a b-girl, having historical knowledge helps me develop and recognize which movements are considered a part of the b-boying style. Furthermore, knowing the foundations of breaking movements, why they're used, how they're used, who used them or didn't use them, helps me improve my execution and adapt the movements into my own personal style. When I started breaking, Murphy encouraged me to stick to the basic top rocks, such as the cross step and Indian step. He emphasized that getting the foundations down before creating my own style develops my relationship to the music, how the movement feels in my body, and also helps me understand what the purpose of top rock is. After I became more comfortable and learned that top rocks are set in the dance for b-boys and b-girls to find their own groove, I expanded from the basics and added my own variations. I was able to find liberation and expression in the movement through embodying that cultural knowledge.

In the sharing of knowledge, upholding a frame of mind that considers history from more than one narrative promotes healthy evolution of the culture. George-Graves writes about the multiple narratives in African diasporic dance as they are set for the concert stage. She writes, "African and African American forms of storytelling tend to embrace both the linear and the

circular and blur (or indeed simply refuse to accept) boundaries between theater, dance, storytelling, and ritual" (70). This concept of "blurring the boundaries" also applies to the conversation of hip-hop history, existing as a multitude of simultaneous happenings throughout time that all feed into the same cultural movement. Ham speaks on the point that no dance or culture occurs from a single story, especially hip-hop:

> It's human nature to want to write some kind of one narrative, but no. It's never…really like that. Sorry…it was mess. And saying it happened that way, you sort of lose what made that moment so great and how it happened. (Dorian S. Ham, interview)

Ham points out how telling a history from multiple perspectives reveals more truth and knowledge about a culture whereas limiting to a single narrative of a culture causes harm. Recognizing the ways hip-hop emerged throughout time in different places across America enriches the culture and brings forth its values more prominently.

With this, I paraphrase part of my interview with Momar Ndiaye, contemporary and hip-hop dancer as well as a professor in dance at The Ohio State University (OSU). He explains his perspective on expanding traditions within African dance using the ideas of preservation versus conservation. Preservation, by his definition, holds onto the original form of something, i.e., traditional African dance, by protecting any adaptations from outside forces. Whereas conservation allows the original form of something to be utilized and/or adapted, as long as it credits and references its origin. Ndiaye supports evolution of a dance when practicing the idea of conservation. However he emphasizes, "The downside about that is, people will take elements and transform it, and not want to talk about its origin" (Momar Ndiaye, interview). Ndiaye explains that in the process of evolving cultural traditions through dance, the need to credit where the movement first originated is what keeps the culture unified.

If evolution occurs without crediting where the idea came from, then the culture risks separation, disconnection, or even appropriation. It ties together the reason in which hip-hop practitioners emphasize the importance of history through the continuation of oral tradition. Murphy explains more on the progression of hip-hop culture catalyzing evolution of its values:

> Breaking has changed a ton over the years. There was values that were more important at the beginning compared to what is valued now. When we start going away from some of the values that we hold, it's not necessarily always a bad thing. It can be like change, you know. (Kaleb Murphy, interview)

Relating back to my experience training as a b-girl, I noticed the ways being a woman in this dance challenged many values upheld in b-boying, more so than that of race. Hip-hop culture and b-boying are male-dominant and I often was the only female in the room at practice. Custer describes her experience as a b-girl working with the b-boying value of masculinity:

> Values of hard work and determination and machismo makes you go hard [at practice]. The other side of that masculinity, some people will call it toxic masculinity or machismo, has definitely not helped women in the scene. It's much more friendly now than it was when I started and even before me, it was much worse. Partly that's unwanted sexual attention. I have experienced that in the scene for sure, and that is rampant. That still exists. You're luckily around great guys that are just going to push you and support you and honor you. That's kind of rare.

Custer, knowing the b-boys I currently practice with from being in the breaking scene, defended their good character to which I agree. My experiences with the value of masculinity upheld in breaking has never encountered unwanted attention from men. Custer weighs the value of machismo in the dance:

> That masculine energy can tip either direction to be really helpful and make you have an amazing dance skill, or it can also you know, lead to these other problems in the scene that are...

She trails off in her last sentence, not wanting to further open the conversation about controversies in the breaking scene during the interview. Personally, my efforts in trying to embody the dance by watching the movement of only male bodies required a lot of negotiation about my own femininity. Imani Kai Johnson considers this phenomenon in her essay, "From Blues Women to B-girls: Performing Badass Femininity." She writes, "B-girls stake claim to a freedom of expression that pushes the boundaries of gender performativity for female-bodied persons of a certain age" (19). In my experiences as a developing b-girl, the dance forced me to discover new ways to express my femininity through my movement. Like Johnson described, I found a freedom in the dance when I could adapt its movement to my own body without feeling like I needed to look like the b-boys I trained with. Simply being a woman, my interpretation of b-boying's machismo pushed cultural norms to become more inclusive.

Summary of Results

The biggest takeaway from my research comes from reflecting on the importance of engaging in this community as a participant-observer. I learned a lot about what it means to step back in my own perspectives and biases through my white, female, contemporary-concert dance lens. Engaging with hip-hop culture and practicing b-boying, a dance unlike anything I have experienced before, broke down my own biases and stereotypes in extremely personal ways. I had to confront the ways I thought a dance space should function considering how I interpreted music, learned movement, and showed etiquette. Specifically speaking to the b-boys I practiced with regularly, the personal relationships we made and the generosity they extended in helping bring me into the culture of hip-hop sincerely encouraged me to continue working hard at this dance. In centering their cultural knowledge, experiences, and contributions to the culture, I

developed a great respect for each of their commitments to b-boying. Having experienced the topics I wrote about through breaking brought a deep level of intimacy with my research that directly increased my analysis.

Implications

Going forward, I hope to continue training as a b-girl and become more involved with the scene, especially as the limitations of COVID-19 dissipate. In learning b-boying within its cultural context as a contemporary dancer, I hope to serve as a bridge between the two dance worlds. It is important to note, that because of my thoughtful approach to research, engaging as a participant-observer and centering the experiences of people in the culture before academia, I learned more about the essence of hip-hop culture and b-boying than one could learn in a studio context. I emphasize that the most valuable part of my research is not necessarily the knowledge I gained, the biases I broke down within myself, nor is it my improved ability in the dance. My research is important because of joy that I feel in in discovering myself through b-boying. This joy includes more than just the dance, but also the relationships I built in the b-boying community and the ways I have been brought into hip-hop culture by their help. This joy is not the reason why I want to continue this work, but is a result of the work to which I cannot explain how rewarding that feels. Alongside my personal practice, continuing to read books on the discourse of hip-hop culture interests me, specifically by Halifu Osumare and Paulo Freire. I will continue forward in the posture of a forever student to my research, learning more about b-boying, its history and its cultural values. Lastly, it is important to note that I remain a guest to hip-hop culture, for it is one I partake in and uplift, but is not one of my own.

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